



LIN ONUS: Yinya Wala



Left: (Detail)
Riddle of the Koi (diptych), 1994

Cover:
Fish at Malwan, 1996
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182 x 182 cm

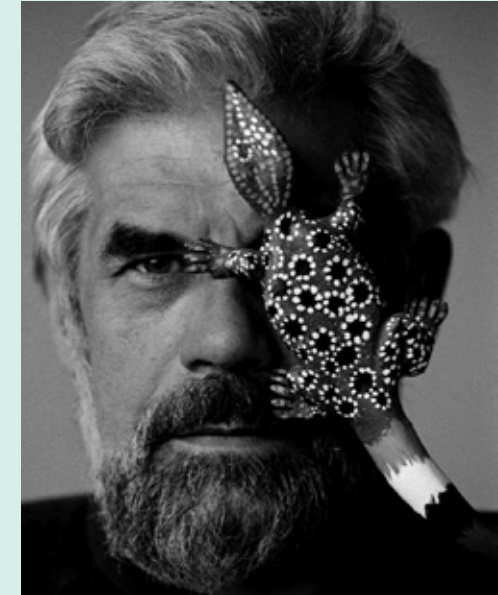


Image courtesy of Andrew Chapman Photography

LIN ONUS: Yinya Wala

Lin Onus writes his own history. In doing so he not only raises questions about the place Aboriginal art occupies in Australian art history and his location within each, but its inextricable relationship to colonial history. He 'reads' the events and processes of history and inscribes them into the present with an eye to the future for the purposes of conciliation. In the dynamic cycles of definition and re-definition, possession and dispossession that have marked the history of Aboriginal affairs in Australia. Onus has challenged western art definitions of history.

Onus was a cultural terrorist of gentle irreverence who not only straddled a cusp in cultural history between millennia but brought differences together not through fusion but through bridging the divides making him exemplary in the way he explores what it means to be Australian.

Margo Neale, 'Tribute - Lin Onus', *Artlink*, Issue 20:1, March 2000



Foreword

Lin Onus (1948-1996) was one of the most successful and influential Australian Indigenous artists of his generation whose work was empowered by a sensitive and sophisticated blending of traditional Aboriginal designs and Western art; specifically, this meant including *rarrk* (cross hatching) within his own particular style of photo-realism. This enabled him to connect with a unique and powerful voice that impacted on a wide cross-cultural and political arena, both within Australia and internationally.

As one of the first artists of the 20th century urban Indigenous art movement in Australia, Lin Onus thus effectively and evocatively addressed political and social concerns through paintings and installations that utilised irony and wry humour rather than confrontation for their impact. Significantly too, his connection to country and the Indigenous understanding of what lies beneath the surface of things, empowered him to depict landscapes of lyrical and luminous beauty that highlight nature's fragility, while also celebrating its capacity for regeneration.

Mossgreen is extremely delighted and proud to present the exhibition *Lin Onus: Yinya Wala* (Light/Water) with works drawn from the Estate of Lin Onus. As an exhibition that tours to London, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, it will enable a wide audience to appreciate the enduring impact of Lin Onus's achievement and contribution as an artist.

We are extremely grateful to Jo Onus, Tiriki Onus and Amanda Hall for their generosity in releasing these works and for their guidance and support of the project. We also warmly thank and acknowledge the authors, Wally Caruana, Richard J. Frankland, Margo Neale and Tiriki Onus, whose insightful and meaningful texts are included in this catalogue.

Frances Lindsay AM

Dingo Crucifixion, 1994

The sun’s just starting to touch the horizon, and while the desert night will soon bring with it a special type of cold that only exists out in the flat lands of central Australia, it’s still nearly 40°C in the camp. It’s 30 years ago and my father and I are sitting by a fire, sifting through a bag of treasures collected that day on the road - a rosella, a magpie, galah, finch and budgerigar - all creatures who have met their ends on the bonnets and bull-bars of passing cars, and whose feathers are now going to be used to tell new stories.

This is the ritual of our trips through the centre. As we pluck, Lin tells me stories of how my ancestors, my yenbena, honoured the spirit of the creatures around them, using feathers for ceremony and art; making sure that the animal's spirit lived on.

This time it’s special though. This time there’s a possum. We found him somewhere in South Australia earlier that morning, and now we’re sitting probably 800kms away skinning and curing the hide. As he peels back the skin, Lin tells me different stories this time, about how once every Aboriginal person in the south-east wore cloaks made of possum, cloaks that told our stories and defined who we were. But with invasion, with the decimation of our culture, the practice was lost. Just like Aboriginal people, the animals upon which we had built our identity were seen as an inconvenience, an unpleasant truth which challenged the perceived history of the nationhood of Australia and undermined its colonial roots.

The dingo and the possum; once so central to our very existence in this landscape had, for Lin, become synonymous with his own struggle, their plight so similar to his. Now possums are seen as an urban pest which lives out its life in ceiling and wall cavities, emerging at night to ravage rose bushes and fruit trees.

The dingo is a recurring theme of Lin’s work. Adorned with the colourful ochre bands of Toas and wax dog sculptures from the Lake Eyre region, it was the animal with which Lin identified the most. Whether surreally surfing on the back of a stingray in the *X & Ray* series or sculpted walking through dog-proof fences, the dingo was Lin embodied in his work.

The image of a dingo crucified on fencing posts with barbed wire is my favourite, and also one of the most disturbing works from my father’s œuvre. Here the dingo is not the personal embodiment of Lin, but rather an allegory for the suffering of both the native dog and his own people; forcibly removed from their traditional lands, poisoned, shot and outcast, our histories had so many parallels, but growing up in our house the heroes we celebrated were not those who had conquered, but rather those who achieved against all odds, who cast off their victimhood to survive and ultimately contribute to change the world in which they lived.

As we sat there in the heat skinning and plucking, these were the stories of resilience that filled my head – not just of an individual or a people, but of a world that was, is and will always be, and a knowledge that it was only due to the sacrifices of others that I exist at all, I stand on the shoulders of giants.

It took 30 years and Lin didn’t live to see it, but I finally finished that possum skin cloak and Lin’s granddaughter was the first in our family in seven generations to be born with her own.

Tiriki Onus

Tiriki Onus is the son of Jo Onus and Lin Onus (1948-1996). He is a noted Bass Baritone who is active in opera and performance art, and is a lecturer in Indigenous Arts and Culture at the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne. In 2014 he was awarded the Inaugural Hutchinson Indigenous Fellowship, The University of Melbourne, for a project on the significance of possum skin cloaks for the Koori people in southeast Australia. Given at birth, possum skin cloaks were kept and worn for life, incised with designs and stories, and then buried with the body at death.



Dingo Crucifixion, 1994
gouache with gold leaf on illustration board
50 x 38 cm

Lin Onus: Yinya Wala

‘I kind of hope that history may see me as some sort of bridge between cultures...’

Lin Onus 1990¹

The title of this exhibition *Lin Onus: Yinya Wala* (Light/Water) provides a starting point for the appreciation of the poetry, lyricism, spirituality and political imperative that exists in the work of this artist who bridged both Australian Indigenous and the Western visual systems of art. Onus blended different strands of the latter with the Indigenous understanding of spiritual meaning that is encoded in the knowledge of country that is of key significance for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Over the past 40 years much attention has been focused on the daring and visionary work of Indigenous artists working in remote and traditional communities throughout Australia that commenced with the emergence of the Western Desert Art Movement at Papunya, Central Australia in 1971-72. However, by the 1980s another revolution was taking place with urban-based artists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait ancestry, such as Trevor Nicolls (1949-2012), Robert Campbell Jnr (1944-1993), Gordon Bennett (1955-2014), Tracey Moffatt (b.1960) and Lin Onus (1948-1996), who were empowered by the perspective of having grown up in a metropolitan environment and were conscious of both their Indigenous heritage and the urgency of reclaiming their culture.

Onus accomplished this in a career that was shortened by his untimely death at the age of 47, with an œuvre that is compelling in its auratic capture of aspects of the natural world, especially those experienced in the environs of his Indigenous ancestral region of the Barmah forest, located along the New South Wales side of the Murray River near Echuca. It was here that his father William (Bill) Onus, had grown up in the Aboriginal settlement of Cummeragunja, and as a child Lin accompanied Bill on regular visits that continued into adulthood. It became a special place for cultural learning through stories told by his uncle Aaron Briggs, a cultural custodian known as ‘the old man of the forest’. It was he who bestowed on Onus the Indigenous name ‘Burrinja’, meaning ‘star’.

Lin Onus was born in Melbourne in 1948, the only child of Bill Onus, a Yorta Yorta man and Mary McLintock Kelly Onus whose family was of Scottish descent. Both Bill and Mary who met at a political rally, were strong advocates for social change with Bill being the first President of the Australian Aboriginal League and Mary being an active campaigner for social equality and human rights. Bill Onus was Australia’s first Aboriginal person to be appointed a Justice of the Peace, and he and his brother Eric were key advocates for the Referendum Movement in 1967 that gave Indigenous Australians the right to vote. However, for the young Lin Onus, growing up in the 1950s and 60s in the predominately white middle-class suburb of Deepdene and attending high school in the leafy suburb of Balwyn, meant being taunted with racist slurs and leaving school at the age of fourteen².

This first-hand experience of racial prejudice, combined with the example of his activist parents, contributed to Onus’s commitment to advancing the rights of Indigenous Australians. In 1971 he attempted to establish a Land Rights claim in the Sherbrook Forest in the Dandenong Ranges, but realized later that his voice could best be heard through art. His eloquent messages concerning dispossession and equal rights thus became one of the defining aspects of his work as an artist whose multi-faceted works, infused with cross-cultural and political references, are underscored by a subtle sense of humour and irony. This is apparent with works in this exhibition such as the sculpture *Ray* 1989 where the much maligned dingo projects a ‘self-referential’ image of survival in his ‘striped pullover’ in the Indigenous colours; or with the flock of confrontational and highly-charged red-tailed black parrots, perched ironically on an electrical high-wire rather than a eucalyptus branch. Other works too provide subtle political comment on the intrusion of modern society into the natural environment, as in *Fences, Fences, Fences* 1985, where *tromp-l’oeil* cyclone fencing gives the illusion of being stretched over the landscape, thereby enclosing and dispossessing the viewer.

Lin Onus took up painting in 1974 and in the following year held his first exhibition of watercolours and photo-realist landscapes that were strongly influenced by the noted Arrernte artist, Albert Namatjira (1902- 1959) who had stayed with the Onus family when he was visiting Melbourne. Namatjira was born at the Hermannsburg mission west of Alice Springs, and his watercolours in a western realist style, capturing the light and extraordinary colour of the Central Australian landscape, had made him Australia’s most recognised Aboriginal artist of the time. Other seminal influences on Onus’s development as an artist included the work of Nyungah artist, Revel Cooper (1933-1983) and that of the Koori artist Ronald Bull (1942-1979); and he also absorbed some of the surrealist elements to be found in the early works of Melbourne artists, Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) and Albert Tucker (1914-1999).

Onus’s prodigious skill as mainly a self-taught painter was however, undoubtedly honed though helping his father create artefacts for the three tourist shops that he owned under the company name of *Aboriginal Enterprises*, with Bill Onus regularly stopping the traffic with boomerang throwing demonstrations. Lin Onus recalled, ‘For years I painted kangaroos on the boomerangs my father sold to the tourists. It was only in 1974 that I started getting serious about art, and all I had then was a set of sign-writer’s brushes, a few tubes of oils and some house paint’.³ When his father died in 1968 Lin tried unsuccessfully to revive this souvenir business; but over the next decade his career as a painter gained momentum, as did his involvement and contribution in seeking the advancement and welfare of Indigenous artists.

In addition to holding regular solo exhibitions Onus’s contribution to the cultural community was recognised with his appointment to the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1986 at the age of 38. In this capacity he visited Maningrida in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, where he met and became friends with Jack Wunuwun, a traditional elder who became his mentor and adopted him into the Murrungun Djinang clan. Onus returned numerous times to Maningrida

on what for him became a ‘spiritual pilgrimage’, and in 1988 Wunuwun gave him permission to use the *rarrk* (cross-hatch) design, which this highly esteemed older painter used on bark paintings. This was a major turning point for Onus. The provision of a new visual language was a ‘form of spiritual awakening’⁴, symbolically revealing the ancient ways of seeing that had been shared with him and which involved as Wunuwun had expressed, ‘going beneath the surface of things’⁵. This liberated Onus from struggling with the nexus of working in a Western manner while wanting to engage with his Indigenous background. It thus enabled him to embrace a new style of painting in which certain elements, namely native fauna such as fish, frogs, bats, crocodiles, stingrays, lizards, goannas, tortoises and butterflies were realistically rendered and ‘indigenised’ by the over-layering *rarrk* design in the Aboriginal colours of ochre, black and gold.

Lin Onus: Yinya Wala, features a number of watery landscapes by Onus that are exceptional in their lyrical beauty, such as *Fish at Malwan* 1996 and the masterful diptych *Riddle of the Koi* 1994; as well those works that feature Onus’s employment of the ‘*rarrk*’ as seen on the frog in *Garkman Doori Yarrara* 1995, and on the flying bats in *Warrinyu* 1996. By including living creatures in his landscape paintings and by featuring the dingo in sculptural installations, Lin Onus was thus able to persuasively communicate knowledge and awareness of the need to respect the natural world that we inhabit. While his works celebrate nature as a place of regeneration and wholeness, they also make a powerful and resonant comment on the sense of displacement, dispossession, inequity and disorientation that has been the experience and history of Australia’s Indigenous people since colonization. Lin Onus reminds us of the beauty, but also the fragility of the land and our relationship to it, as well as our relationship with each other, and in so doing his art resonates beyond Australia to the international arena.

Frances Lindsay AM

1. Lin Onus, artist statement, cited in Neale, M. et al., *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, Craftsman House in association with the Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, 2000, p.21.

2. He was expelled on a false allegation of car theft.

3. Lin Onus quoted in ‘John Monks meets a new Aboriginal painter moving well beyond traditional means’, *The Australian*, 10 November 1977.

4. Lin Onus, quoted in Donna Leslie, ‘Earth, spirit & belonging in Australian art’, *Spirit in the Land*, McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, 2010/11 p.19.

5. Neale.M, p.19

Fences, Fences, Fences, 1985

One of the artist's earliest paintings in the photo-realist style that was to become the hallmark of his work, *Fences, Fences, Fences* takes in a close-up view of a section of Barmah Forest in flood seen through a wire-mesh fence. The forest at Barmah straddles the banks of the Murray River that divides the states of Victoria and New South Wales. In 1881, Cummeragunja, a Christian mission, was built on the New South Wales side of the river. The mission was one of dozens that were established across the continent of Australia in the nineteenth century, and well into the early twentieth century, to house Aboriginal people who had been taken off their customary lands, to educate them in the language and ways of the new settlers, usually at the expense of their Indigenous cultural attributes. Cummeragunja had become the home of Lin Onus's ancestors, including that of his father Bill Onus and uncle Aaron Briggs, the so called 'old man of the forest', who were both influential in the artist's upbringing. Barmah Forest was the artist's spiritual home; it became a major recurring theme in his oeuvre and eventually it also became his resting place.

Redolent with personal symbolism, Barmah Forest is emblematic of traditional life of the Yorta Yorta, the language group to which Onus belonged. *Fences, Fences, Fences* refers to the colonial enterprise – a historical fact and its attendant fictions that pervade the work of Lin Onus. In this picture, the presence of an overpowering 'other' is clearly evident. The separating line of the fence presents the viewer with a conundrum: does it imply the view of the outsider looking in at traditional lands, and by extension at a traditional way of life? Or is the view that of the banished yearning to return to the spiritual home? Is the fence a filter through which we now see the landscape of Australia?

Does it suggest the European notion of ownership of real property that is so much at odds with the intrinsic Aboriginal connection to country which is often described by the aphorism 'we do not own the land, the land owns us.'²

Two later seminal works by Onus in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia build upon conceptual and visual elements present in *Fences, Fences, Fences*.³ The antithesis of the colonial filter through which we see and interpret the landscape is evident in *Jimmy's Billabong* of 1988 which depicts an Arnhem landscape painted in the naturalistic European mode, as is the flooded forest of Barmah here, but seen through a traditional *rarrk* or cross-hatched screen representing the pattern of Onus's adopted clan, the Murrungun of Arnhem Land. We see the landscape through Aboriginal eyes. The sculpture series *Dingoes*, 1989, is a metaphor for the treatment of Aboriginal peoples since the early days of settlement. It features the native dog in five attitudes from a mother dog with its new-born pups to a dying dog caught in a trap. One part has a dog caught half way through a wire-mesh fence, similar to that depicted in *Fences, Fences, Fences*. The overt reference is to the dingo proof fence that was erected in the 1880s and stretched 3,500 miles across the south-eastern corner of the continent to protect introduced livestock from the canine predator. In contrast to the barrier created by the fence in *Fences, Fences, Fences*, here Onus celebrates the struggle of Aboriginal peoples to penetrate a fence symbolic of exclusion and apartheid.

Wally Caruana

1. Neale, M. et al., *Urban Dingo : The art and life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, Craftsman House in association with the Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, 2000, p.14.
2. For a brief interpretation of the painting as representing a 'colonial enclosure' see Ashcroft B, 2013, 'Hybridity and Transformation: The Art of Lin Onus', *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1 - 18, <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1706>
3. Illustrated in Cubillo, F. and W. Caruana (eds), *Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection highlights*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010, pp.234-5; and in Neale 2000: plate 2, p.10 and plate 22, pp.74-5.



Fences, Fences, Fences, 1985
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
120 x 165 cm

Dhua Birds, 1987

Lin Onus was a pioneer among Indigenous metropolitan-based artists who made the pilgrimage to remote Aboriginal communities to learn and seek inspiration from Aboriginal artists working in the classical traditions. Onus first went to Arnhem Land in 1986 as an artist-member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts where he met the master bark painter Jack Wunuwun (1930-1991) of the Murrungun clan of the Djingang people, a fateful meeting that was to have a profound influence on Onus's work. In 1987, the year he painted *Dhua birds*, Onus returned to Arnhem Land with his family, specifically to Wunuwun's home at Gamardi, the first of sixteen personal visits he would make to the region. While Wunuwun instructed Onus on the techniques of bark painting and on the interplay of symbolic figurative and non-figurative imagery, he also guided Onus on the Djingang world view and the interpretation of the landscape, a landscape with which Wunuwun was intrinsically bound, physically, emotionally and spiritually. These were attitudes that Onus incorporated into his paintings, as well as the depiction of certain subjects and cross-hatched clan patterns (known as *rarrk*) which Wunuwun bestowed upon him by dint of adopting Onus and his family into the Murrungun clan.

Adoption into a clan means the individual is incorporated into the local kinship system. Each person has a specific rank that determines, *inter alia*, the nature of their interaction with and responsibilities to other clan members, ownership of land, roles in ceremonies and access to painted

designs. The fundamental classification in the Aboriginal social structure of Arnhem Land divides the society into two so-called moieties (an anthropological term derived from the French *moitié* meaning half). In Arnhem Land these are known as the Dhuwa (or Dhua) and Yirritja moieties. Membership of a moiety governs social and ritual behaviour so that, for example, according to the rules of marriage, an individual must marry a member of the opposite moiety. Every living and inert entity, every person or clan, all Ancestral Beings and ceremonies, and all flora and fauna belong to one of the two moieties.

Wunuwun belonged to the Dhuwa moiety and therefore his adopted son, Lin Onus, would also belong to that moiety and have the right to paint certain Dhuwa subjects. Each moiety possesses a number of totemic species. For the Dhuwa moiety of the Murrungun clan, the red-tailed black cockatoo (or crested parrot) is one of its totemic animals. In *Dhua birds* Onus had depicted a line of ten cockatoos perched on a wire that suggests the birds are in an urban or built environment, rather than 'out bush',¹ symbolic perhaps of the artist's place as an urban-based Aboriginal person. Onus's paintings are riddled with visual puns, partly due to Wunuwun's tutelage. In this work the colours of the cockatoos' tail-feathers are those of the Aboriginal flag: yellow, black and red.² A subtle sense of humour pervades much of Onus's work; here one cockatoo seems to be the centre of attention.

Wally Caruana

1. The range of the species covers half the continent.

2. In the late 1980s Onus often sported a West German football shirt that featured three bands in the Aboriginal colours.



Dhua Birds, 1987
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
110 x 166 cm

Ray, 1989

Lin Onus produced a number of sculptures and installations that powerfully referred to political issues concerning Aboriginal displacement and rights, while also projecting a wry sense of humour and irony. Such is the case with the fibreglass sculpture *Ray* 1989, which presents a dingo with stripes in the ochre, yellow and black colours, looking as one commentator has noted, 'like a neck to knee football jumper' ¹

Ray relates to a pack of dingo sculptures by Lin Onus in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. *Dingoes* 1989 is an ensemble group featuring dingoes in five different situations or vignettes including a mother dingo with puppies, another caught in a metal trap and one penetrating a wire mesh barrier – referencing the high wire mesh 'dingo proof' fence that was constructed in the 1880s to mainly protect introduced sheep and other livestock from dingo attacks. This fence, one of the world's longest structures, stretches some 5,600 kilometres from Eastern Queensland down to the edge of the Great Australian Bight in South Australia.

As an Indigenous Australian, Onus related to the dingoes' survival skills and sense of independence despite the methods employed to control and vilify them. He noted, 'They're mystical, aloof and among the most intelligent of all animals. They are circumspect around humans, though the Aboriginal people have always thought of them as a powerful force, but unattainable.' ²

When Onus was producing his dingo works he used the family dog Mirrigarn as the model.

Frances Lindsay AM

1. Nicolls, C., 'Urban dingo: postmodernism without tears', *Art and Australia*, Vol.38, No.4 June-August, 2001, p.536.

2. Lin Onus quoted in 'Good Weekend' magazine, *The Age*, 23 December 1989.



Ray, 1989
synthetic polymer paint on fibreglass
79 x 135 x 29 cm



Mandigining, 1992
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91.5 x 150 cm



Bulla Goonyah, 1993
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182 x 182 cm



Lin in his studio at Upwey, Victoria, June 1993.
Image courtesy of Andrew Chapman Photography

The Riddle of the Koi, 1994

One of the most admired aspects of Lin Onus's work is his ability to 'go beneath the surface' especially in those paintings that have been described as his 'watery landscapes', where he focuses on the beauty of nature and the effects of light on water at various times during the diurnal circle of the day. Key among these works are those that contain images of fish portrayed in a fascinating interplay with the reflected patterns of vegetation, trees and clouds of their environs.

The Riddle of the Koi was inspired by a trip to Japan in 1989 when Onus undertook a residency in Yokohama. There he was intrigued by the anomaly between the refined aesthetic sense of Japanese style that extended to carefully conceived and manicured gardens, and the highly industrialised nature of the large cities.

As he noted, '*I was fascinated with the paradoxes in Japanese society... these paradoxes were interesting particularly in relation to their environment which was full of smog, chromium and glass and yet people were really into gardens... A garden isn't complete without a pond and much less complete without fish.*

I did a fish painting whilst I was there and the fish image keeps coming back to me in various ways. The next phase was to paint the fish to make them traditional in some sort of way. Because if I didn't do that I'd be just painting a fish. So that was really the start of the fish paintings'.¹

Frances Lindsay AM

(on following pages)

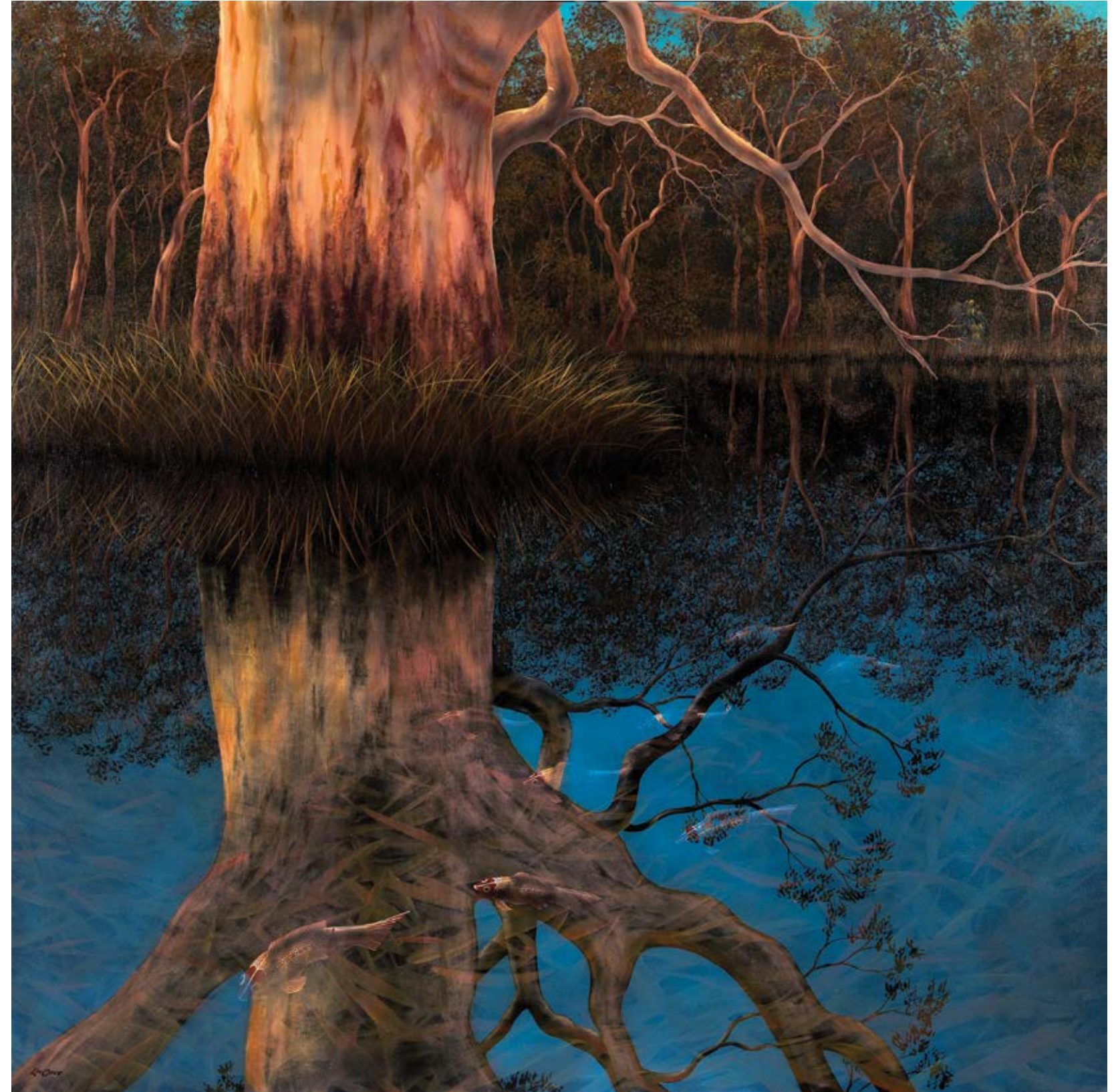
Riddle of the Koi (diptych), 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
221 x 442 cm

1. Thompson, Liz., *Aboriginal Voices: Contemporary Aboriginal Artists, Writers and Performers*, Simon & Schuster, Brookvale 1990, p.131.





Desert Landscape, 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91.5 x 121.5 cm



Goonyah Ga Yarra, 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182 x 182 cm
*Melbourne and Sydney viewing only

Garkman Doorri Yarrara, 1995

I first heard of Lin when I was young, an artist who lived east of Melbourne, who was facilitating our peoples' voice with his art. I got to see some of his paintings over the years, innovative, daring, yet to me, calming work, speaking volumes, facilitating the voice of my people, past, present and planting seeds of hope for the future. We Aboriginal and Islander people, during the eighties and nineties, were becoming more recognised on the world stage with our art, our films, our songs and carving the way for it all was our visual art. In September 1999, I wrote about Lin and my brother and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in a poem called New Age Warrior.

*"When Wal dreamed of people tellin story
With whiteman technology
And Lin painted story in his art
When we marched together
To bury our dead
To tell the world of the scars on our heart
I stood and watched the new age warrior
Story men and women"*

I was drawn to this painting for its raw beauty and reverent freedom, the colours remind me of autumn in my country and the frog takes my heart toward my youth. One may see this painting and see only the voice of the aesthetic, I am fortunate to see much more, I see the voice of our people presented in all its glory by one of our most important New Age Warriors, Lin Onus.

Richard Frankland



Garkman Doorri Yarrara, 1995
gouache on illustration board
47 x 71.5 cm



Warrinyu, 1996
gouache on illustration board
27.5 x 63.5 cm

Djerriwah, 1995
gouache on illustration board
27.5 x 63.5 cm



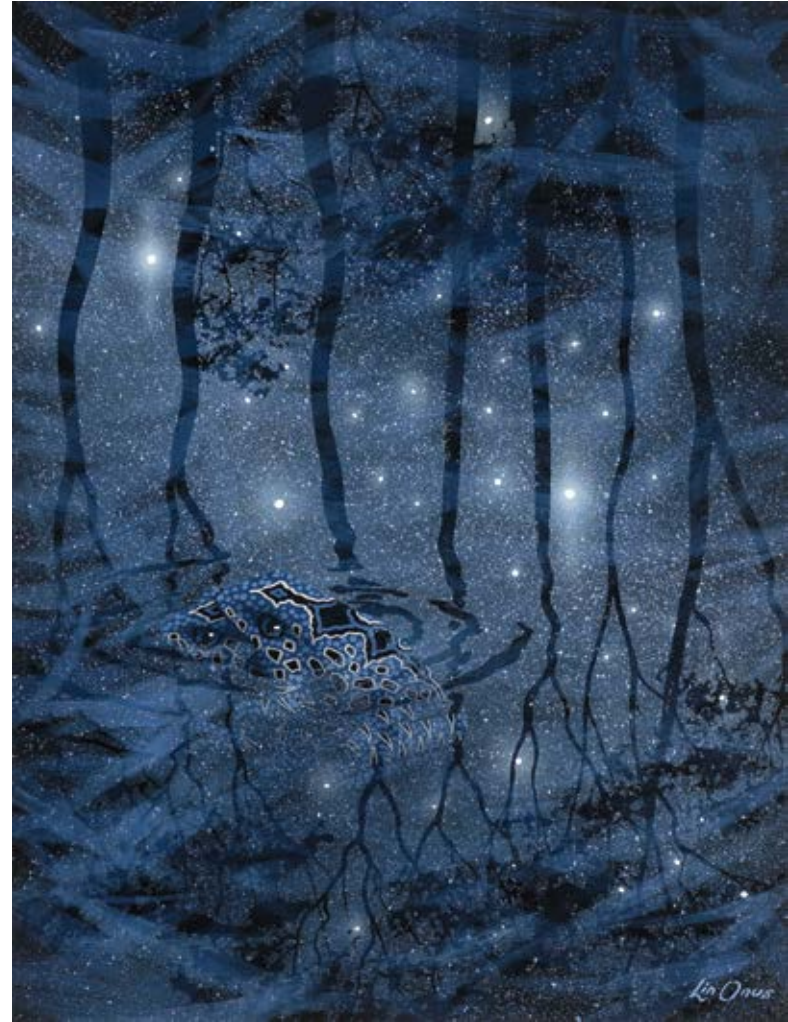
In Search of the Waterhole, 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91.5 x 121.5 cm
*Melbourne and Sydney viewing only



Rock Goannas on Holiday 2, 1995
gouache on illustration board
50 x 38 cm



Sunset Lizards, 1995
gouache on illustration board
50 x 38 cm



Friendly Frogs 2, 1995
gouache on illustration board
50 x 38 cm

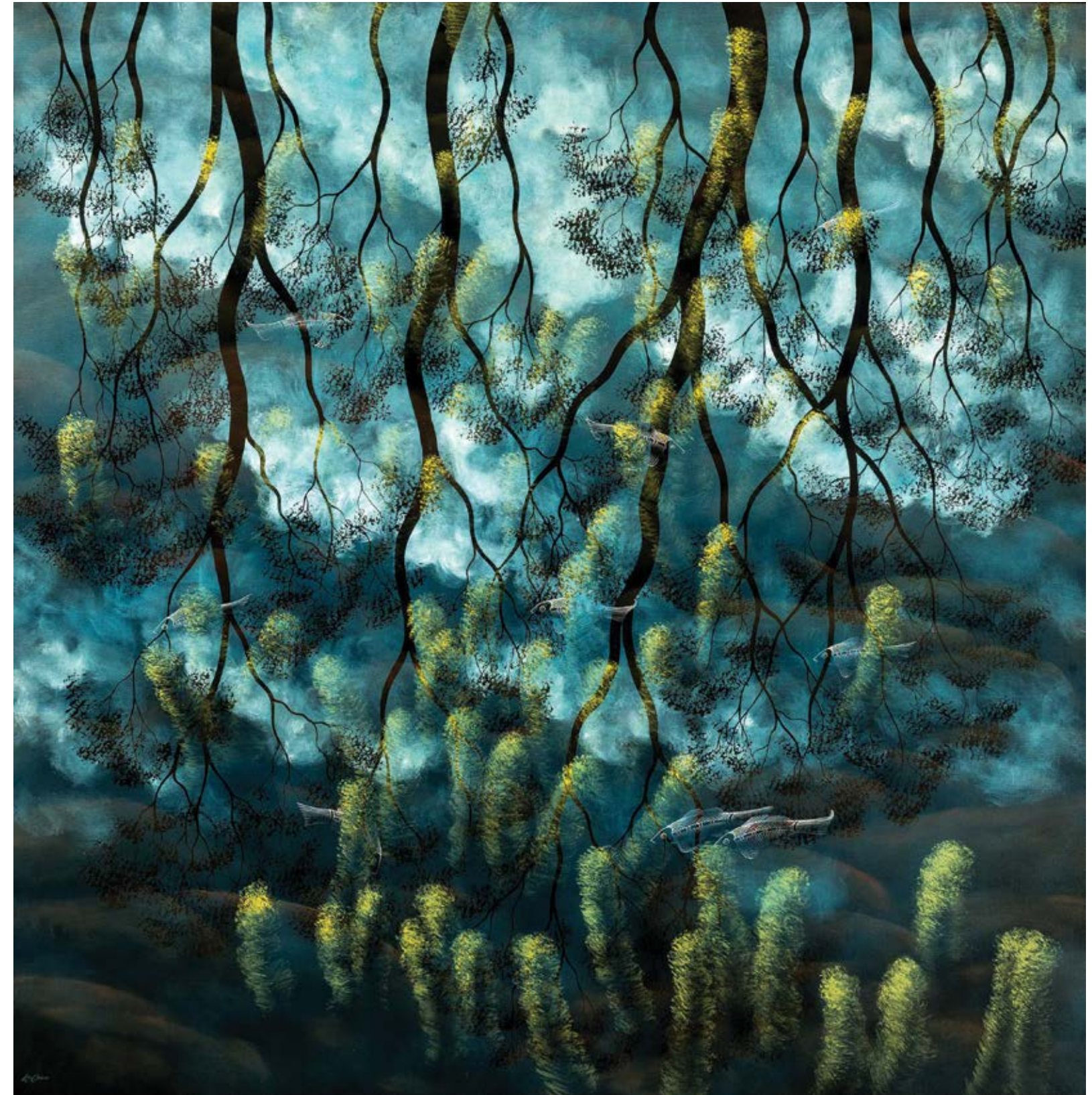
Fish at Malwan, 1996

In 1986 Onus visited Garmedi Arnhem Land where he met his mentor Jack Wunuwun who adopted him into the Murrungun-Djinang clan and gave him permission to paint in the *rarrk* cross-hatching design which he utilised throughout his career.

What he learnt is evident in his watery landscapes. Rich in reflections and ambiguities these enigmatic views clearly dispensed with the conventional European panoramic view for what Wunuwun described as 'seeing below the surface'. The concept of transparency was explained in Wunuwun's innovative painting *Barinumbir, the morning star*, 1987 (National Gallery of Australia) where cross-hatched fish are visible through woven fish traps. This is similar to Onus's practice of showing cross-hatched fish through water. Like all good art, these pieces function at many levels. They are deceptively picturesque, for things are not always as they seem. Laden with cross-cultural references, visual deceits, totemic relationships and a sense of displacement they, amongst other things, challenge one's viewing position: are you looking up through water towards the sky, down into a waterhole from above, across the surface only, or all three positions simultaneously? The presence of the Indigenised frogs, lizards and geckos within the landscape also refers to totemic landscapes and is part of a process of claiming custodianship of the land or expressing a sense of belonging.'

Margo Neale, 'Lin Onus, A Cultural Mechanic' in *Lin Onus*, (exhibition catalogue), Savill Galleries, Melbourne, 30 Oct–23 Nov 2003, p.1.

Fish at Malwan, 1996
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182 x 182 cm



*Left Foot Practice
with Best Friend*, 1996
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182.5 x 153 cm
*Melbourne and Sydney viewing only



Biography

Lin Onus (1948–1996)

Lin Onus was born in Melbourne in 1948, the only child of William (Bill) Onus a Yorta Yorta man and Mary McLintock Kelly Onus whose parents came from Glasgow, Scotland. He was named William McIntock Onus, later shortened to Lin Onus. Mainly a self-taught artist he took up painting in 1974 at the age of 26 and in the following year held his first solo exhibition. Recognition of him as an artist soon followed, with Onus being the recipient of a number of awards, including the Fifth Aboriginal Art Award, Darwin in 1988 and the Kate Challis RAKA Award (The University of Melbourne) in 1993.

His leadership capacity led to him becoming a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, and Chairman of the Board from 1989 to 1992. It was as the Victorian representative of the Board in 1986 that he visited Maningrida in Arnhem Land and met traditional elders including Jack Wunuwum, who became his mentor and in adopting him into the clan gave Onus permission to use the *rarrk* (cross-hatch) design on his own works.

Lin Onus dedicated himself to helping to advance Indigenous Australian artists – he was co-founder of the Aboriginal Arts Management Association in 1990 and a founding member and Director of the copyright collecting agency, Viscopy in 1995. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1993 in recognition of his service to Aboriginal welfare and to the arts. In 1994 he was appointed to the Victorian Council of the Arts and received the National Indigenous Heritage Art Award. In 2013 both Lin Onus and his father William ‘Bill’ Onus (1906-1968) were inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll.

Following his death in 1996 at the age of 47, a touring retrospective, *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, opened in 2000 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney to coincide with the Sydney Olympic Games; before touring to Brisbane and Melbourne. This exhibition organised by Curator, Margo Neale, had been in preparation by the Queensland Art Gallery before the artist’s death and the publication produced for this retrospective remains the key reference book on Lin Onus’s work.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1975	Aboriginal Advancement League, Melbourne
1977–80	Holdsworth Gallery, Sydney
1988	‘The Maningrida Experience: Recent Paintings by Lin Onus’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
1989	‘Lin Onus’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
1990	‘Paintings and Sculpture by Lin Onus’, Painters Gallery, Sydney
1991	‘Lin Onus’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
1992	‘Lin Onus: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings and Sculpture’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
	‘Lin Onus: Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture’, Painters Gallery, Sydney
1993	‘There and Back: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings and Sculpture’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
1994	‘24 Hours by the Billabong and Other Stories’, Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane
1995	‘Bama-Mutjing (Barmah-My Father’s Country)’, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
2000	‘Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996’, Retrospective Exhibition, Queensland Art Gallery; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Melbourne Museum
2008	‘It all started from Black, in Memory of Lin Onus’, Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery, Sydney
2016	‘Lin Onus: Yinya Wala’, Mossgreen touring exhibition; London; Melbourne; Brisbane; Sydney.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1976	‘Two-person Exhibition with Ronald Bull’, Taurinus Gallery, Melbourne
1984/87/88	‘National Aboriginal Art Award Exhibition’, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1984	Lin Onus, ‘Musqito Series’ in ‘Koori Art ’84’, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1986	‘The Dreamtime Today: A Survey of Contemporary Aboriginal Arts and Crafts’, Flinders University, Adelaide
1987	‘Art and Aboriginality’, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, UK
1988	‘Urban Aboriginal Art: A Selective View’, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia
	‘A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art 1938-88’, S.H.Ervin Gallery, Sydney
	‘Bulawirri/Bugaja –A Special Place’, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1989	‘Perspecta: A Koorie Perspective’, Artspace, Sydney
	‘Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition’, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
1990	‘Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences’, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
	‘Tagari Lia: My Family’, Contemporary Aboriginal Art from Australia, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, Scotland
1991	‘Australian Perspecta’, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
	‘Contemporary Aboriginal Art’, Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria
1992	‘Crossroads: Towards a New Reality: Aboriginal Art from Australia’, Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan; Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan
	‘Strangers in Paradise: Contemporary Australian Art to Korea’, Art Gallery of New South Wales; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea
	‘Aboriginal Art and Spirituality’, High Court of Australia, Canberra

1993	‘Kate Challis RAKA Award (Ruth Adeney Koori Award)’, The Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne (awarded prize).
	‘Aratjara: Art of the First Australians’, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany; Hayward Gallery, London; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1994	‘Second National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Award and Exhibition’, Old Parliament House, Canberra
	‘True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Raise the Flag’ - (a Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative Touring exhibition), Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool; South London Gallery, London; City Gallery, Leicester, UK.
	‘The Urban Aboriginal’, Embassy of Australia, Washington, D.C., USA
	‘Power of the Land: Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art’, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
	‘Yiribana’, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1995	‘Seven Deadly Australians’, Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane
	Austral Gallery, St. Louis, USA
	‘The Urban Aboriginal’ Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada
1996	‘The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art’, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
1997	‘Von Mueller Exhibition’, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne
	‘ANARE Jubilee Antarctica Art Exhibition: Images of the Great South Land’, Dallas Brookes Hall, Melbourne; National Wool Museum, Geelong
	‘Saltwater, Freshwater, Borewater’, Regional Galleries Association of Queensland (Touring Exhibition)
1999	‘Eternal’, Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane
	‘The Seasons in Australian Art’, Lauraine Diggins Gallery, Melbourne, (Touring Exhibition)
2010–11	‘Spirit in the Land’, McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin (Touring Exhibition)
2014	‘Legends: Aboriginal Master Works’, Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane

Biography

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Lindsay, R. and Teale, P., *Spirit in the Land*, McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, 2010

Leslie, D., ‘Earth, Spirit & Belonging in Australian Art’, *Spirit in the Land*, McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, 2010

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Frog in Reeds, 1996
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91.5 x 121.5 cm
*Melbourne and Sydney viewing only

Contributors

Wally Caruana is an independent curator, consultant on Indigenous Australian Art, and author. He was the Founding Curator, then Senior Curator of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection at the National Gallery of Australia from 1984 to 2001.

Richard Frankland is a noted Indigenous Australian singer/songwriter, playwright, author and film-maker. He is Head of Curriculum and Programs at the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne.

Frances Lindsay AM, is Head of Australian Art at Mossgreen. She was Deputy Director at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2000 to 2012, and previously was Foundation Director of The Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne. She has an extensive track record of exhibitions and publications.

Margo Neale is the Senior Indigenous Curator and Indigenous Advisor to the Director of the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, where previously she was the inaugural Director of Indigenous Programs and the Gallery of First Australians. Formerly at the Queensland Art Gallery she established the Indigenous Art department, and was the Curator for the touring exhibition *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*.

Tiriki Onus is the son of Jo Onus and Lin Onus (1948-1996). He is a noted Bass Baritone who is active in opera and performance art, and is a lecturer in Indigenous Arts and Culture at the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne. In 2014 he was awarded the Inaugural Hutchinson Indigenous Fellowship, The University of Melbourne, for a project on the significance of possum skin cloaks for the Koori people in southeast Australia. Given at birth, possum skin cloaks were kept and worn for life, incised with designs and stories, and then buried with the body at death.

Right: (Detail)
Garkman Doorri Yarrara, 1995



Glossary

Birrikala Na Gaypal *Lemon migrant butterflies and wattle*

Bulla Goonyah *Two fish*

Dhua *(Dhuwa) is one of the two social moieties in Arnhem Land, the other is Yirritja. Lin Onus was adopted into the Dhua moiety of the Murrungun clan, of which the black cockatoo is a totem. See entry at p.10.*

Djerriwah ga yarrara *Lizards and gum tree*

Djerriwah *Lizard*

Garkman doori yarrara *Frog on a tree*

Goonyah ga yarra *Fish and gum tree*

Mandigining *Crocodile*

Warrinyu *Bats*

Yinya Wala *Light (and) Water*

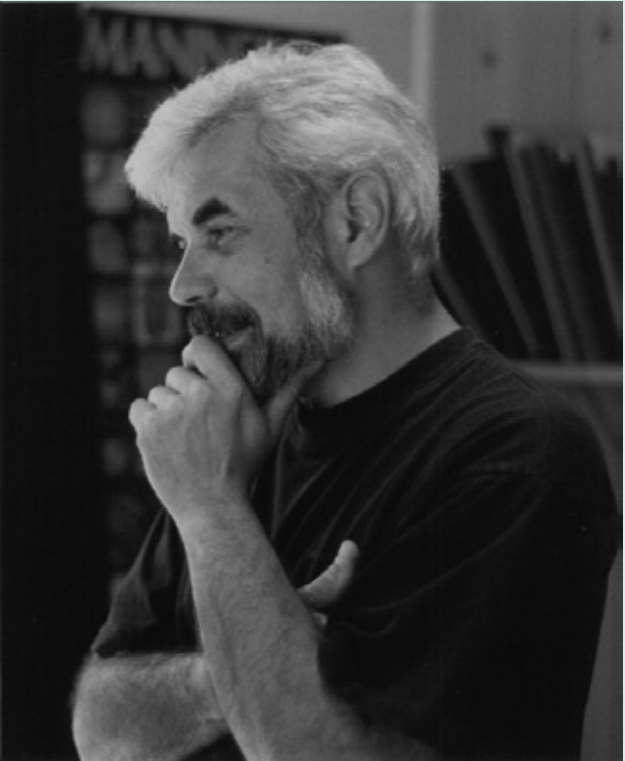


Image courtesy of Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll (2012)

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